DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 545 CS 003 709

AUTHOR Alahuhta, Eila
TITLE Practical Approaches to the Teaching of Reading in Finland.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at Premiere Conference sur la Lecture (Beaumont sur-Oise, France, April 13-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Beginning Reading; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Individual Needs; *Instructional Materials; Media Selection; Psychomotor Skills; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Readiness; Reading Research; *Speech Skills; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Finland

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between preschool children's speech abilities and their basic abilities (perception, powers of reasoning, and spatial orientation), providing insights into what teaching methods and materials can be useful for basic reading instruction in Finland. Results, gathered by ranking 100 preschoolers according to speech ability, show that children belonging to the poorer speech-ability groups have greater difficulties in perception, powers of reasoning, and spatial orientation than do those belonging to the better speech-ability groups. After discussing the basic aims of reading instruction in Finland and the teaching methods and materials now used in Finnish reading programs, the study concludes that basic abilities need to be stressed at the preschool level and that teachers of basic reading should use a variety of teaching methods and materials to meet students' individual needs. (RL)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED146545

Eila Alahuhta

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF READING IN FINLAND

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Eila Alahuhta

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

Introduction

In Finland the child starts his formal education in the year he reaches the age of seven. It has been shown, however, in many parts of the world that the mental age of 6 1/2 constitutes the basic prerequisite for learning how to read.

The age at which a child in Finland goes to school could be regarded as optimal given that the mental age and the chronological age coincide. There is no good reason, however, to doubt (even though as far as I know, systematic studies have not been carried out here in Finland) that the true situation would not correspond to that presented in Malmqvist's findings (1973), namely that the mental age of the child in the first class of school varies between 4 years 11 months and 11 years 8 months, the period of fluctuation, therefore, covering 6 years 7 months.

Competent mental age alone, however, is no sure guarantee that the school beginner will find that learning to read is an effortless process. What is also required is a sufficient degree of basic ability. The child should be able to make faultless auditory and visual observations. He should possess an adequate tactual discriminating ability and the ability to grasp auditory and visual entities rhythmically. Spatial and

CS003709

motor orientation and co-ordinating abilities are also important basic requirements, which, as with the above-mentioned, are also reflected in the child's speech performance. The fact is that school beginners differ radically from each other in all these respects. (ALAHUHTA, On the primary factors affecting linguistic ability in pre-school children, 1977.)

- - -

The principal aim in this study of pre-school children was to examine the following hypothesis: Those belonging to the weaker speech ability groups have greater difficulties in perception, powers of reasoning and spatial orientation than those belonging to the better speech ability groups.

An investigation was carried out with a test battery adapted and evaluated by the present writer on the basis of the Suzanne Borel-Maisonny tests (the BMA test). The test material comprised 100 pre-school children (5 years 9 months - 6 years 9 months) from five different day-care homes.

All pre-school children undergoing the tests (70 children) from three day-care homes were tested in succession, and the other two homes provided children (30 in number) who were most readily available for special testing on the test day and whose parents had given permission for their participation in the investigation. The test items of the battery were used to study the test subjects as regards auditory, visual, tactual and olfactory discrimination ability and also with regard to the understanding of spatial relations, orientation and organization ability and logic and powers of reasoning.

The test subjects were divided into four different speech ability groups (I, II, III, IV) according to the following criteria: vocabulary, the motor production of speech, articulation, the mastery of word formations and the ability to construct sentences.

Speech ability group I included those children whose speech, as regards the above-mentioned criteria, was more or less free from faults. Those children were classified in speech ability group II who made some mistakes. Group III comprised those who made rather a lot of mistakes and group IV those whose speech was full of mistakes. The number of point mistakes formed the basis of the classification.

The results showed that the weakest speech ability groups were, as regards all abilities referred to in the hypothesis, weaker, on the average, than speech ability group I. Statistically significant differences occurred in rhythm manipulation ability and in the area of spatial evaluation and presentation ($p = 0.1$). The differences in motor orientation ability were statistically almost significant ($p = 0.5$).

The test battery, which I had already used in the study of children of school age (ALAHUHTA, On the Defects of Perception, Reasoning and Spatial Orientation Ability in Linguistically Handicapped Children, 1976) also proved useful in charting the primary symptoms of speech, reading and writing disorders in pre-school children.

The heterogeneous nature of the situation is further complicated by the fact that some of the children can read rather fluently (7.8 %) on starting school, some can read to some extent and are familiar with the letters (28.3 %), others are not yet able to form words (63.9 %) and some are familiar with only a few letters (21.7 %) (RÖMAN 1962).

Since teaching children with such varying levels of ability has to be carried out in the same class (average number: 32 pupils), attention should naturally be paid to these different levels when programming and when drawing up and developing teaching methods and material.

BASIC AIMS

Since this question is concerned with the methods and materials of the teaching of reading in Finland, it would seem appropriate to present first of all those basic aims which the School Board has laid down in its published memoranda for the proposed regulations pertaining to the teaching program in comprehensive schools and which, in relation to the teaching of reading in the first form, are as follows:

"The basic aim is that the pupils become familiar with and are able to pronounce the relevant capital letters by the end of January (the school year in Finland begins 18th - 20th August), and that they are capable by the end of the spring term (31st May) of reading 'word perfect' a text comprising

several sentences, even though their performance may be awkward."

Teaching a child to listen is also closely connected with teaching him to read:

Pupils should be able "at the end of the spring term to tell which sound they heard in the different parts of the word". They should also "be able to distinguish which syllable can be heard at the beginning and which at the end of a three syllable word".

The memoranda also emphasize the importance of not hurrying the child in the initial stages of reading instruction: "In teaching the first three or four letters, practice time of one and a half weeks should be devoted to reach letter. Later, two letters per week should be assimilated."

Teaching Methods and Material

Teachers have a comparatively free hand in choosing their teaching methods and material. Various publishers offer a range of six text books and experimental publications that are suitable for first form work, and are approved by the School Board. These appeared between the years 1972 and 1976, so that the directions included in the teaching manual that accompanies the book are almost completely representative of those methods which are in use at the present time in the teaching of reading in Finnish schools.

The synthetic method quite clearly occupies a pre-eminent position, and this is quite logical since the Finnish language is to a very high degree a phonetic language. In practical teaching situations, various procedures may be adopted in implementing this method: the letter reading method, the phonetic reading method and the partial phonetic reading method.

According to the chief inspector of the School Board, the letter reading method clearly predominates when one takes the whole country into consideration. As regards the province of Uusimaa (which includes the city of Helsinki), the so-called area school supervisor estimates that the letter reading method is being implemented in 50 to 60 per cent of cases, and in other cases either the complete or the partial phonetic reading method is being used (R,S,M,N,V are taught according to the phonetic reading method, and K,P,H,T, for example, according to the letter reading method).

It would seem, however, that the phonetic reading method is gaining ground due to the recognition of its importance as a promotor of correct spelling. Thus, the advantage of Finnish as a phonetic language would be fully exploited in order to help those with special problems in learning how to read.

Teaching is carried out according to the analytical method, too, and some teaching manuals recommend its use alongside the synthetic method, at least as soon as initial obstacles have been overcome.

The order in which letters are taught varies in all six ABC primers mentioned above. The reason for these different systems lies in the fact that an attempt is made to teach letters in order of difficulty, or, on the other hand, in the fact that meaningful words can be formed as soon as possible from the letters learned.

The order in which letters are taught in the first term in the various ABC primers:

1. I A E U L T N O S K M P R J V H Ä Y Ö D G B C F X Z Å Q W
2. I E T S A N L U O P K R J V Ä M H Y D Ö B C F G X Z Å
3. I L U E T A N O S P R M K V J H A Y Ö D NK NG B F
4. A I L U O K E T N S M P R J V Ä H Y Ö D NK NG
5. A S I U R M E K O P T J H L N V Ä Y Ö D B C G F X Z Q
6. A I U M S O P L E T R N K Y Ä Ö V J H D G

The so-called non-Finnish letters are taught last in all the primers, some only as late as the spring term.

Before the actual teaching to read begins, that is before acquaintance with the letters is made and before attempts are made to combine them into syllables and words, the child's basic abilities should be trained, and he should be taught to listen with concentration.

Almost all the primers mentioned above contain sections devoted to the training of certain basic abilities: visual perception ability, orientation and hand-eye co-ordination. In the listening exercises, guidance is given in distinguishing

durations of sound, rhythms and different sounds from spoken words. By varying the teaching, attempts should be made, in connection with instruction in the first form, to pay attention to the individual needs of both the more and less advanced pupils. The more advanced children should not be allowed to become bored, and for the less advanced children basic exercises should be made more efficient.

The heterogeneity inherent in first form teaching will certainly be reduced to some extent when the compulsory pre-school system becomes a reality in Finland, although it is my personal opinion that an appreciable improvement in the situation will only be achieved when children who are retarded in linguistic development and in speaking receive, even before pre-school age, systematic and efficient therapy for the primary symptoms that lie behind their disorders.